

DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA 91125

THE POET AS WORKER IN PIERS PLOWMAN

John M. Bowers



HUMANITIES WORKING PAPER 96

© John M. Bowers November 1983

THE POET AS WORKER IN PIERS FLOWMAN

Because history has denied us even the minimal details of Langland's life and looks, our guesses about his resemblance to his narrator-protagonist must be always tentative and unsure, forever couched in the language of uneasy hypothesis. Yet on one point we can be absolutely certain: like Will the Dreamer, William Langland was a poet. Largely on the basis of the Visio, we can envisage him as a medieval avatar of the wandering Orpheus, driven by the need to speak forth in his own voice, bringing forth verses calculated to threaten what was most unstable and sinful in his society. In return, he earned the hatred of those representing the true threat within the frail unity of that society, the "lollares of Londone and lewede ermytes." The English poet addressed a religious community that was too often content with the easiest if not the surest route to salvation. Men could give alms to false beggars, they could support unholy hermits, they could confess to friars and pay silver for light penance. Unable to close his eyes to the implications of these practices, Langland sought to shock the folk out of their communal complacency -- itself a form of

pandemic sloth -- into a keener perception of the Giant Sloth that reckoned to destroy true Unity as soon as Friar Flattery succeeded in putting Contrition to sleep.

At the same time, there is a cross-current running throughout the poem, intensifying in the B and C versions, which is created by the sense that Langland felt no deep confidence in the merit of working as a poet. Whatever the causes of this uncertainty -- perhaps criticism from onlookers who mistook the poet's occupation as an excuse for idleness, perhaps his own intense awareness that words often fail to achieve the intentions of a writer -- Langland's ambivalent attitude bespeaks a wavering of the will in the face of the challenge. This ambivalence also shows itself in the kind of poetry he wrote. Unlike a mystic such as Richard Rolle who struggled with the problem of how to communicate a nearly ineffable experience, Langland's difficulty lay in deciding what to communicate: which topics to exclude, which answers to prefer, how to distinguish the greater from the lesser good in the pursuit of the perfect life.

If Langland indeed shared the Dreamer's slothful temperament, but recognized his native infirmity well enough to explore it in his characterization of Will, then it is reasonable to assume that he also sought other remedy, finding part of it in a regimen proven effective over the centuries: the act of writing. Thus by acknowledging Langland's personal inclination to sloth, we can reconcile the two conflicting impressions we get of him as a poet: his anxiety over the value of his work, and yet his life-long persistence in that craft --

the one of which is acedia's symptom, the other its cure.

Respect for the power of language runs very deep in Langland's poem. He has taken special care to describe all the important events of sacred history as miracles of speech or writing.¹ Wit interprets the act of divine creation as a linguistic process under the control of God: "And al at his wil was wrouȝt wiþ a speche, / Dixit & facta sunt" (B. ix. 32-46). The word of prophecy in the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ (B. xix. 80-82), and because the Virgin "conceyued þoruȝ speche" of the Holy Ghost, the Incarnation is also transformed into a linguistic act: "Verbum caro factum est" (B. xviii. 129; v. 499). Just as Moses had received the Old Law through the letters engraved upon the Tablets (B. v. 566-91), Christ inaugurated the New Law by saving the adulterous woman through the characters he wrote in the dust: "Holy kirke knoweþ þis, þat Christes writyng saued" (B. xii. 76-84). Even the first act of salvation is described as a result of language; when the gates of Hell are broken with the breath of the words Rex glorie, and Christ marshals a phalanx of texts against the speechless Satan -- "I may do mercy þoruȝ my rightwysnesse and alle my wordes trewe" (B. xviii. 389). Langland never misses an opportunity to look beyond the evocative and even the hieratic powers of language to elevate it as the supreme instrument of God's work on earth.

When Langland accents the role of God's word in the act of creation, he also emphasizes man's likeness to the divine maker -- "Faciamus hominem ad imaginem nostram" (Gen. 1.26; B. ix. 42) -- with the clear implication that man's capacity for language sets him apart

from all other creatures as perhaps the foremost element in his God-like nature. Since Christ's verbal miracle at Cana stands as the first instance of Dowel, the use of language must somehow be involved in living the good life and repairing man's divine image. It is therefore not surprising that the Tree of Charity bears leaves of "lele wordes" and blossoms of "buxom speche" (B. xvi. 6-7) and that various definitions of the Three Do's involve the correct uses of language. The figure Thought explains that Dowel is practiced by anyone who is "meke of his mouþ, milde of his speche" and "trewe of his tunge;" that Dobet is someone "louelich of speche" who has preached to the people and translated the Bible (B. viii. 78-95). Wit later adds that Dobest means not wasting the speech "þat spire is of grace / And Goddes gleman and a game of heuene" (B. ix. 99-106).

This point is dramatized later when the Holy Ghost descends to divide the gifts of grace, bestowing the first blessing on those men who will use language faithfully to preach, instruct, and otherwise aid their fellow Christians (B. xix. 229-33). The definitions offered by Thought and Wit are really elaborations of a lesson given much earlier by Holy Church herself. When Will asked the question of central importance to the whole poem -- "How may I save my soul?" -- she had explained that the surest treasure was Truth:

For who is trewe of his tonge, telleþ noon ooper,
 Doop þe werkes þerwip and wilneþ no man ille,
 He is a god by þe gospel, a grounde and o lofte,

And ek ylik to oure lord by Seint Lukes wordes.
 The clerkes þat knowen it sholde kennen it aboute
 For cristen and vncristen cleymep it echone.

(B. i. 88-93)

This is the first passage in the poem to suggest the alliterative trio of words, works and will that develops into such an important interlocking theme.² Holy Church says that to gain salvation a man must speak true words, perform works accordingly, and bear an ill will toward no man. She adds that it is the duty of clerics to spread the gospel (Thought's definition of Dobet). Beneath the placid surface of her advice, however, lurk problems that Langland would discover later when he began to plumb deeper. Cannot a man speak true words arising from a false will? And cannot a well-intended cleric write a long allegorical poem, but lose the merit of his work through the inability of his audience to understand its hard meaning?

A man's work with literature is useful, says Langland, when the words are inspired by God and are therefore valuable to Christian readers. Those who write saints' lives give comfort to the poor, Cato's "stories" teach men how to bestow alms, and compilers of bestiaries offer their audiences examples both instructional and pleasing.³ The Angel appeared "to pastours and to poetes" to announce Christ's birth (B. xii. 148-50), and the Holy Ghost continues to inspire men to write the books without which clerics would be like blind men: "Alþouȝ men made bokes, þe maister was God, / And Seint

Spirit þe samplaries, & seide what men sholde write" (B. xii. 101-02). The philosopher Plato is called a "poete," and Lady Scripture praises the "patriarkes and prophetes and poetes" who condemned wealth while preaching poverty (B. x. 178 and 344-45).

But Will draws into question the value of writing when he recalls the fate of Solomon and Aristotle:

Maistres þat of Goddes mercy techen men and prechen,
Of hir wordes þei wissen vs for wisest as in hir tyme,
And al holy chirche holdeþ hem boþe in helle!
And if I shal werche by hir werkes to wynne me heuene,
That for hir werkes and wit now wonyep in pyne,
Thanne wrouȝte I vnwisly, whatsoeuere ye preche.

(B. x. 389-94)

If Will raises doubts about the writer's profession by summoning up the examples of pre-Christian authors, men whose good words did not compensate for their deficient works, Langland himself frames a disturbing scene just prior to the Harrowing of Hell in which Book (the Bible) appears to bear witness to the truth of these sacred events and, what is more, to swear that unless things happen as he says, he should be burned. The syntax of this passage is sufficiently ambiguous to have elicited articles from distinguished scholars, but the general implication is clear. Even a text as sacred as the Bible can be trusted only as long as its message is confirmed by events, and

whenever it fails as a repository of truth, it should be rejected.⁴ Langland has generated such an atmosphere of doubt concerning even moral literature that his poem cannot take for granted the merit of its own existence. He is therefore acutely aware of the need, if not always the means, to justify that existence.

Since the Bible offered the surest words for belief, the search for Holy Church's "best treasure" involved the understanding of this and related Latin texts through a variety of exegetical methods. Working in the shadow of a lengthy tradition of theological commentary, however, a vernacular poet must have felt wary about the limitations of his more modest enterprise. Not only did his mother-tongue lack the allusiveness and sacramental power of Latin, but his culture at large had no adequate literary theory allowing intrinsic value to the creations of the human mind. A.C. Spearing has summed up the difficulty in this manner:

A fiction might be seen as an allegory or parable, in which case it could be said to convey the truth in a veiled form. . . . Or again a fiction might claim to be a true history, an account of what really happened as set down in authentic sources. But there was no way of saying that a fiction possessed an imaginative truth or validity even though it did not correspond to any literal truth. . . . In these circumstances, to present a literary fiction as a dream -- one imaginative product as an analogue or metaphor for another imaginative product -- offered a medieval poet an

extremely useful way out of his dilemma.⁵

This assessment may apply well enough to Chaucer and other secular poets such as the satirists of the Alliterative tradition, but when a religious poem is offered as a work of the human imagination, even sub specie visionis, it is laid open to all the suspicion attached to that unreliable mental faculty. Since Will is not steadily guided by an authority such as Lady Holy Church, and since he simply transcribes his dreams without due regard for their interpretation or enquiry into their trustworthiness, Piers Plowman incorporates in itself the limitations as well as the resources of poetry as a product of imagination.

As if to compensate for the shortcomings of a vernacular dream-vision, Langland seems at first sight to have sought justification for his poem by using many of the truth-seeking methods practiced at the universities, namely, the scholastic disputation, as well as the methods of Scriptural commentary so ably discussed by Robertson and Huppé. Bloomfield's claims are less far-reaching but no less positive: "This use of Biblical (and Patristic) citation, besides giving Langland the authority he seeks for, reveals a remarkable sense of the power of language."⁶ This would be more comforting if Langland were the only speaker, but his poem contains many voices, each trying to exploit the power of language to its own best advantage. The Pardon Scene, for example, is heavily encrusted with Scriptural citations which do not really serve the central topic of the debate. At bottom, the argument

has to do as much with texts and their interpretation as with the validity of the pardon. The Priest, who misses the message of the pardon through his hollow sophistry, is so distracted by outward show that he never consults the Bible itself; and Piers, who seeks value beyond formalism, prefers the simple wisdom of the Bible to the distorted and confusing interpretations of clerics. Thus the Pardon Scene dramatizes one of the poem's most disturbing realizations about language: even sacred texts can be abused by willful men whose intentions are corrupt, although their methods enjoy the full sanction of clerical tradition.

Suspicion that language has the potential to corrupt mankind runs as deep in Langland's poem as his respect for its power to effect divine miracles. Just as the crucial events of sacred history are enacted through language, so too does Langland find the abasement of language at work behind most of the evil in the world. The bad angels fell because they believed Lucifer's lies (B. i. 116-18), and Imaginatyf says that Adam possessed Eden only as long as he refrained from talking, but was driven out when he grumbled about his food and sought forbidden knowledge (B. xi. 417-19). Satan's continuing presence in the world is represented at the beginning of the poem by the Dungeon where dwells the Father of Falsehood, who had urged Adam and Eve to disobey, counselled Cain to murder his brother, tricked Judas into betraying Christ, and continued to spread his lies throughout the land. When Will asks to know more about Falsehood, Holy Church summons forth his daughter Lady Mede, who is about to marry

False Fickle-tongue: Fauel þoru₃ his faire speche hæp þis folk
enchanted, / And al is Lieres ledynge þat lady is þus ywedded" (B. ii.
42-43).

Indeed, the desire for mede or material reward lies behind much
of the preversion of speech. Lawyers will not open their mouths unless
they can expect a large fee (B. prol. 211-14; vii 40-52). The corrupt
friars are singled out for special comment because they gloss the Bible
in any distorted manner necessary to elicit money from the people (B.
prol. 58-61); in the end, Friar Flattery enters Unity through "hende
speche" and lulls Contrition to sleep with his false guarantees.
Again, the twisting of Scriptural citations can be traced back to Lady
Mede:

"I leue wel, lady," quod Conscience, "þat þi latyn be trewe.

Ac þow art lik a lady þat radde a lesson ones

Was omnia probate, and þat plesed hire herte

For þat lyne was no lenger at þe leues ende.

Hadde she loked þat left half and þe leef torned

She sholde haue founden felle wordes folwyng þerafter:

Quod bonum est tenete; Trupe þat text made."

(B. iii. 337-43)

As usual, not all practices fall solidly on one side of the line
dividing good from evil, Truth from Falsehood. As part of his sermon
against the corrupt priesthood, Anima criticizes university dons and

doctors for not knowing their material, as well as clerics for "overhopping" parts of the Mass and Divine Office:

Doctours of decrees and of diuinite maistres,
 That sholde konne and knowe alle kynnes clergie
 And answe to Argument₃ and assoile a Quodlibet --
 I dar noȝt siggen it for shame -- if swich were apposed
 Thei sholde faillen of hir Philosophie and in Phisik bope.
 Wherefore I am afered of folk of holy kirke,
 Les þei ouerhuppen as oopere doon in office and in houres.

(B. xv. 380-86)

Failure to learn the skills appropriate to one's profession and careless syncopation of a prayer or liturgical text may not spring from the same malice of intent as the hypocritical friar's distortion of a text for his own selfish ends, but both faults would have been viewed as the idle use of language and were grouped together under the rubric of acedia.

The phrase "idle speech" is not carelessly used in Langland's poem. The spirit of temperance teaches men not to waste "wordes of ydelnesse" (B. xix. 286), and Conscience instructs Peace to close the gates of Unity against "titeleris in ydel" (B. xx. 299). The adjective "idle" itself suggests a particular vice, and in the Confession scene the personification Sloth admits that he is occupied every day "wip ydel tales at þe Ale and ouperwhile in chirches" (B. v. 402-03).

While speech can figure in the enactment of many different vices, Langland takes special notice of its involvement in acedia. Among "þe braunches þat bryngen a man to sleupe" are the instances in which a man prefers "an harlotes tonge" and grows angry if he hears anything except "wordes of murþe" (B. xiii. 414-19). Immediately following these branches, Langland launches into a sermon on the good and evil uses of language:

Patriarkes and prophetes, prechours of Goddes wordes,
 Sauen þoruȝ hir sermon mannes soule fro helle;
 Riȝt so flatereris and fooles arn þe fendes disciples
 To entice men þoruȝ hir tales to synne and harlotrie.

(B. xiii. 427-30)

Though Haukyn has confessed to all seven deadly sins, Langland leaves the odd impression that the "foule wordes" of flatterers and entertainers have done the most to soil his coat and leave him in a state of near desperation; his tirade against unholy minstrels is prefaced with the line, "Thise ben þe braunches, beþ war, þat bryngen a man to wanhope" (B. xiii. 420-57).⁷ At the end of the poem, Langland again makes this peculiar connection between deceitful speech and the severest form of acedia when he says that Wanhope, the bride of Sloth, is the daughter of Tom Two-tongue, "þat neuere swoor truþe" (B. xx. 159-62). If vitiating speech and sloth are intricately bound up with one another in Langland's sensibility, then we can see why he might

have worried that his hard poem, so confusing in places and so open to misunderstanding, might have made him appear like one of those who enticed men into sin or wasted their time on "ydel tales."

As with so many other self-criticisms, Langland's personal misgivings about his work as a poet are projected onto Will the Dreamer, in his ability to conduct himself as a Christian writer and in the ways he chooses to justify his "making." Early in the poem Holy Church advises Will to compose a lesson that will express the message of Truth: "Lereþ it þus lewed men, for lettred it knoweþ, / That Trueþe is tresor þe trieste on erþe" (B. i. 136-37). In the A-text she clearly wants this instruction to take the form of poetry,⁸ although in all versions Will tries to beg off with the plea that he lacks "kynde knowyng," which Holy church impatiently defines as every man's fundamental instinct to love God and avoid sin (B. i. 138-46). Much later, Will is still wondering whether he dares to make his dreams known among men. The figure Good Faith (Lewtee) guarantees him that it is permissible for laymen to make public their moral observations in order to reprove sin, but is quick to add the following qualifications:

Ac be þow neueremoore þe first þe defaute to blame;
 Thou₃ þow se yuel seye it no₃t first; be sory it nere amended.
 Thyng þat is pryue, publice þow it neuere;
 Neiþer for loue looue it no₃t ne lakke it for enuye.

(B. xi. 103-06)

Seconded by Lady Scripture, Good Faith's restrictions raise several questions about Will's literary efforts. Is he sincerely reluctant to point the accusing finger? Does he publish some things that are better kept secret? And is he moved always by intentions free of spite, anger, and resentment? In this passage, for example, Will wants to publish his dream abroad because he is angry at the friars because they concern themselves more with burials than with baptisms.

The best known passage dealing with Will's work as a poet (deleted from the C-text) comes early in his interview with Imaginatyf, who criticizes him for wasting his time "wip makynges" when there are already enough books explaining Dowel:

And þow medlest þee wip makynges and myȝtest go seye þi sauter,
 And bidde for hem þat ȝyueþ þee breed, for þer are bokes ynowe
 To telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest boþe,
 And prechours to preuen what it is of many a peire freres.

(B. xii. 16-19)

This rebuke is especially surprising since it comes from the mental faculty responsible for the creation of literary fictions. Moreover, Will's defense is not strong enough to allay the suspicion that these criticisms might be justified. He says that his "making" is identical to the relaxation used by saints in order to reach perfection, and that even stern Cato prescribed amusement as a relief from care: "Interpone tuis interdum guadia curis." But like the text-cropping Lady Mede,

Will overlooks the next line -- "Ut possis animo quemuis sufferre laborem"⁹ -- which makes it clear that periods of enjoyment should be used only to counterbalance labors of the sort he himself has not pursued. The solace of the saints that he mentions is the occupatio prescribed by Cassian for ascetics whose arduous spiritual exercises left them vulnerable to spiritual dryness. In short, Will's excuses do not form a convincing response to the charges, since he has performed none of the physical or spiritual labors that earned relaxation.

While this passage must be read as part of the characterization of Will and not of Langland, it does no doubt express something of the poet's concern over his own literary endeavors. As Nevill Coghill suggests, Langland may have worried that he had chosen a worthless employment and "let himself play about with poetry, only to form an incurable and time-consuming habit that led nowhere."¹⁰ John Burrow further enumerates the questions that might have burdened his mind:

Was it legitimate for him to write such a poem? Was it necessary? Were there not already sufficient books on the Good Life? How could more words help, when what mattered were works and, above all, the secret will itself? Was he not perhaps brother under the skin to his chief enemies -- the glib and hypocritical friars?¹¹

As the projection of Langland's own worst fears about himself, Will does not share this sense of anxiety. He says that if someone would explain the meaning of the Three Do's, he would stop wasting his time

and devote himself entirely to churchly duties. Imaginatyf responds with definitions of faith, hope, and charity that are reliable enough to generate long sections of the allegory in the Vita de Dobet (B. xvi-xvii). And how does Will react? He continues to wander about, writing poetry.

Langland has little further comment about Will's "making" in the B-text. In the first and last lines of Passus XIX, Will does say that he wrote down his dreams as soon as he woke up, although in neither case is there any indication that he questioned their source or tried to interpret their contents. He appears to write as an uncritical transcriber who does not examine and perhaps does not fully understand the substance of his dreams. During the vision in the same penultimate passus, Will kneels when the Paraclete descends in the form of grace to bestow diverse gifts upon the followers of Piers. Yet it is unclear whether the Dreamer is among the recipients and whether poetry is one of the sanctioned labors. The men who receive the gift of words are "prechours and preestes and prentices of lawe" (231); the alliteration invites "poetes" as well, but Langland declined to include them.

Langland's final estimation of the Dreamer's poetic trade is locked away inside the C-text "autobiography," a section whose announced intention is to explain how Will became a satiric poet after his encounter with Reason. The logic of the passage is as riddling as its chronology. Will says that he has launched broadsides against London beggars and hermits, as Reason had instructed, but later we find

among Reason's wide-ranging catalogue of professions no mention of poetry, only a condemnation of the idle life which Will seems to continue following. We are given only hints that his occupation may be worthwhile. Recalling the parable of the woman who searched for the lost coin (Lk. 15.8-10), Will says that he will wait to find grace before making amends for his past life (C. vi. 99-101). If one concludes that Will is indeed among those who receive this gift of the Holy Ghost, then his "making" may be labor according to grace. Otherwise, it is hard to see how his activity at the beginning of the passage constitutes any reform of his past life. As Anne Middleton puts it, "if the activity he intends is 'making,' its nature, subject, and place among other human crafts and estates are left maddeningly unclear."¹² Writing the C-version later in his own life, then, Langland seems to have become more self-critical of his work as a poet and to have vented his anxiety in the depiction of Will, who appears much guiltier of both sloth and poetic misconduct than in A or B.

If Langland explores his personal anxiety over "making" through the characterization of Will, he exposes his misgivings about the literary profession at large through his varied treatments of minstrelsy.¹³ Despite the abundance of references in Langland's work and in other writings of the period, however, it is hard to reconstruct any clear picture of what fourteenth-century minstrels actually did, what roles they played as performers, and what contributions they made to the transmission and even the creation of literature. While a bias against the sort of bardic hero popularized by Sir Walter Scott has led

recent critics like Dieter Mehl to dismiss the "romantic fiction" of the minstrel and to claim for him a role no greater than that of musician, John Burrow offers a more balanced and historically accurate picture of an entertainer who sang, recited stories, and even contributed to the creative process.¹⁴ Thus we must understand that the distinction between poet and performer was much less rigid than in modern times: poets performed their own works in public, while minstrels freely altered, deleted, and added. It is therefore fitting that Piers Plowman presents the minstrel as the archetype for men engaged in the full enterprise of poetry, both the recitation and the process of composition, as well as some of the least savory chores of the profession, farting and fiddling. It is my intention to explore Langland's divided opinion of these performers -- a few of whom were inspired by God, but most of whom were money-grubbing entertainers -- as well as his grave doubts about whether even a good minstrel like Haukyn could lead a life free of the inherent excesses and temptations of his trade.

In the opening panorama of the Fair Field, Langland brings special attention to bear on the two classes of minstrels, one blameless and the other described as the children of Judas, the embodiment of wanhope:

And somme murpes to make as Mynstralles konne,
 And geten gold with hire glee giltless, I leeue.
 Ac Iaperes and Iangeleres, Iudas children,

Fonden hem fantasies and fooles hem makeþ,
 And han wit at wille to werken if hem liste.

(B. prol. 33-37)

These lines set up the lop-sided judgment that runs throughout the poem. Evil minstrels are easy to find. They shelter Liar when he flees from court (B. ii. 230-31); they have common access to Lady Mede (B. iii. 131-33); and they are welcome at the tables of clerics, where they make blasphemous jokes whenever the conversation turns to theology -- and are paid better for their dirty stories than men who always have Holy Scripture on their lips (B. x. 30-58).¹⁵

Good minstrels are much harder to locate in the B-text. The strongest defense comes near the end of Passus XIII where three non-literal entertainers are designated "Goddess minstrales" to replace the fool, the jester, and even the king's minstrels:

The pouere for a fool sage sitting at þi table,
 And a lered man to lere þee what our lord suffered
 For to saue þi soule from Sathan þyn enemy,
 And fipele þee wiþoute flaterynge of good friday þe geste,
 And a blynd man for a bourdeour, or a bedrede womman
 To crie a largesse bifore oure lord, youre good loos to shewe.
 Thise þre maner minstrales makeþ a man to lauþe,

And in his deef deyinge þei don hym gret confort
 That bi his lyue liþed hem and loued hem to here.

(B. xiii. 443-51)

By granting charity to the poor, the sick, and the pious, a patron can receive in return the ultimate entertainment that exists only in Heaven. But this passage, absent in the majority of B-manuscripts and otherwise wedged between two forthright denunciations of real minstrels, offers no consolation to a poet like Langland unless he concentrates on purely religious subjects, as the "lered man" does, without the complications of the dreams and allegories that might well be criticized as frivolous distractions from Truth. Perhaps because the subject-matter moves in this direction in the Vita de Dobet, or because Langland simply became more scrupulous in his treatment of the Dreamer, the B-revisor became sensitive about identifying Will as a musical entertainer and took pains to dissociate him from the more suspicious forms of minstrelsy.¹⁶

There is large agreement among critics that Langland confronted the debased profession of minstrelsy most boldly in this portrayal of Haukyn the Active Man.¹⁷ Haukyn introduces himself as a wafer-baker providing the food men eat, physically as cakes and spiritually as the Eucharist, but his primary occupation is that of minstrel. It has long been argued that he represents the sort of guiltless minstrelsy delineated in the Prologue,¹⁸ but he is an unqualified failure as a purveyor of honest entertainment. Rich lords withhold their patronage,

and no wonder, as Donaldson points out: "The list of things Haukyn cannot do forms one of the most inclusive catalogues of the functions of a fourteenth-century minstrel in Middle English poetry:"¹⁹

Coupe I lye and do men lauȝe, þanne lacchen I sholde
 Ouper mantel or moneie amonges lordes Mynstrals.
 Ac for I kan neiȝer taboure ne trompe ne telle no gestes,
 Farten ne fiȝelen at festes ne harpen,
 Iape ne logele ne gentilliche pipe,
 Ne neiȝer saille ne sautrie ne synge wiȝ þe gyterne,
 I haue no good giftes of þise grete lordes . . .

(B. xiii. 228-34)

If Haukyn is meant to be seen as another stylized reflection of Will and thus of the poet as well, he forms yet another outlet for Langland's self-suspensions and not a means of showing that "the minstrel at his highest is the ideal man of God."²⁰ His Coat of Baptism is stained with all the seven deadly sins, and the idle words of Gluttony cause him to veer toward despair (B. xiii. 399-408). Langland proceeds from the "branches that lead a man to sloth" into a steady condemnation of minstrels, even the "kynges minstrales," concluding with these lines:

There flateres and fools þoruȝ hir foule wordes
 Leden þo þat liȝed hem to Luciferis feste

Wip turpiloquio, a lay of sorwe, and Luciferis fipele.

(B. xiii. 454-56)

Langland quickly adds, "Thus Haukyn þe Actif man hadde ysoiled his cote" (457), thereby leaving the strong impression that the abuses of minstrelsy -- here defined as any manipulation of language to distract men with hollow conceits that cannot sustain hope -- is the immediate cause of Haukyn's sinfulness in general and his acedia in particular. Far from the ideal man of God, Haukyn is left vulnerable to all the vices attached to minstrelsy, so that we are left with the unsettling impression that Langland imagined no way for a man, even with hard work and the best of intentions, to pursue a poetic career without the stain of sin.

Since older men tend to grow more conservative in their politics and morals, it is understandable that the C-poet grew sterner in his disapproval of minstrels -- a group he may have been identified with by others, despite his own sense of a higher calling. It is true that the C-text's description of Haukyn leaves out all mention of his stained coat, but the tirade against sinful entertainers is preserved immediately after the confession of Sloth, where the juxtaposition of subjects renders the moral ramifications of minstrelsy less ambiguous (C. viii. 77-119). The C-poet furthermore withdraws the initial suggestion that there are any good minstrels at all in the Fair Field. Whereas the B-text allowed that some performers were at least guiltless, the C-version drops this exception and elaborates instead

upon the sinfulness of the craft:

And somme murthes to make as mynstrals conneth,
 That wollen neyther swynke ne swete bote swery grete othes,
 And fynde vp foule fantesyes and foles hem maken,
 And hauen witte at wylle to worche yf they wolde.
 That Paul prechith of hem prouen hit ich myghte,
Qui turpiloquium loquitur ys Lucyfers knaue.

(C. i. 35-40)

Donaldson wrestles with the question involved in this alteration: why does the C-text preserve the same attitude as the previous two versions toward all occupations except minstrelsy?²¹ He feels that Langland's campaign against lewd minstrels was linked with a crisis in terminology, the inability of words to define people and professions adequately. Just as the security of the kingdom is threatened by the lack of two separate terms to distinguish good meed from evil meed, the integrity of Langland's enterprise is jeopardized for want of two words to distinguish the many bad minstrels who cracked jokes about the Trinity from the one good minstrel who wrote a serious poem about the Three Do's.

Donaldson concludes that the logic of majority-rule influenced the way in which the crisis was in one sense resolved. Since most entertainers belonging to the profession were dishonest and threatened morality, their opprobrium was transferred to all the practitioners of

the trade and to almost the whole body of entertainment arts.²² Langland offers no defense that would protect himself from the same blame that he casts upon minstrels, except (in the C-text only) the vague suggestion that he is one of the "lunatik lollers" who prophesy under the direct inspiration of God (x. 106-38).²³ In this sense the crisis created within the poem is never wholly resolved. We are left with the feeling that Langland was never fully convinced that his work as a "maker" could be vindicated before the court of public opinion, or in the consistory of his conscience before God.

What do we conclude, then, about a man who spent much of his life writing and revising a poem that he refused to defend as anything more than a dream-journal written as a form of recreation? I believe that some minimal answers to that question -- I stress the word minimal and add provisional -- will come by first recognizing the Dreamer's slothfulness and then inferring that this temperament was most likely shared, self-consciously, by Langland himself. Thus we can detect throughout Piers Plowman, in all versions and divisions, the poet's response to an image of himself as a man given to idleness, pensiveness, impatience, anxiety, and indecision.

Did Langland use poetry simply as an escape from idleness? Ernst Robert Curtius documents a centuries-old tradition in which writers praised poetry as a means of avoiding idleness (otium) and in the Middle Ages as a cure for sloth.²⁴ Seneca offered the warning "Otium sine litteris mors est et hominis vivi sepultura," which the didactic poet Cato put into his Disticha (III, 6) in a verse

immediately preceding the one quoted by Will in his self-acquittal before Imaginatyf. Chaucer knew the topos well enough to have used it in The Book of the Duchess (1155-58) and in the prologue to The Second Nun's Tale:

And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,
 That cause is of so greet confusioun,
 I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse
 After the legend, in translacioun.

(CT, VIII, 22-25)

Since a poet's work requires physical stasis, a writer's efforts always occupy a dubious middle ground inter labores et ocia (to use Gower's expression),²⁵ so that the quality of his labor depends on the ways in which his mind fills the hours of idleness.

Reinhard Kuhn offers an interpretation of one of Dante's more obscure allegories that seems to address exactly this point.²⁶ On the Terrace of Sloth in Purgatorio (xix, 7-33), Dante dreams that he sees a Siren with many enigmatic attributes. Her cross-eyes suggest a warped view of the outside world; her garbled speech, the difficulty of communication; her pale face, a melancholic temperament; her maimed feet, a lack of physical movement; and the absence of hands, a sign that she is incapable of good works. But then she is transformed into something very lovely, because out of acedia may arise a beautiful and haunting song. Yet when Virgil reveals the Siren's foul belly, she

reverts to ugliness. Dante seems to have detected an inspiration within idleness that created a causal relationship between ennui and art, but he realized also that the resultant art could not be morally neutral. Idleness may be the necessary condition for producing poetry, but the poetry itself determines whether the time spent inter labores et otia had been worthwhile.²⁷ This line of thought would have led Langland back in a full circle and left him once again in a state of uncertainty.

Idleness may have been "the ministre and norice unto vice" in the view of Chaucer's Nun and many others who wrote in an effort to avoid otium, but within the range of sloth's species it is the least severe and easiest to remedy. If we assume that Langland's slothful temperament presented a far more serious problem than the improper enjoyment of leisure, then we must suspect that he occupied himself with writing his vast allegory for reasons more complicated than simply eluding idleness. Insight into his reasons is provided by one of the first poets of the Western tradition. Hesiod in his Theogony praises poetry as an escape not merely from idleness but also from taedium vitae:

For though a man have sorrow and grief in his newly-troubled soul
and live in dread because his heart is distressed, yet when a
singer, the servant of the Muses, chants the glorious deeds of men
of old and the blessed gods who inhabit Olympus, at once he
forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all, but

the gifts of the goddesses soon turn him away from these.²⁸

Hesiod has the listener's response first in mind, but it is possible that relief from despondency came also to the singer, the audience of his own poem, from the active process of performance and the business of making verses.

The Hellenic tradition deriving from Hesiod mingled with the early Christian tradition represented by the desert fathers of Egypt, so that the works of John Cassian suggest a prescription against acedia not far removed from that of the Theogony. In De Institutis he speaks repeatedly of the need for physical labor as occupatio, while elsewhere he concentrates upon the monk's duty to regulate his inner disposition by cultivating fortitude.²⁹ Taken together, these pieces of advice serve as a defense for the kind of writing that is both pleasant labor and penetrating self-analysis designed to root out acedia by cultivating the contrary virtue. The efficacy of the prescription is witnessed centuries later when Robert Burton offered this justification for his vast anatomy:

If any man except against the matter or manner of treating of this my subject and will demand a reason of it, I can allege more than one. I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy, . . . I writ therefore, and busied myself in this playing labour, otiosaue diligentia ut vitarem torporem feriandi [to escape the ennui of idleness by a leisurely kind of employment].³⁰

Penelope Doob offers a provocative study suggesting that the troubled poet Thomas Hoccleve followed a regimen similar to those prescribed by Cassian and Burton when he turned to the business of poetry to distract himself from his own melancholy.³¹ With Hoccleve as with Langland, we can never be sure to what extent the account of his life represents factual autobiography, but whether his madness was real or a metaphorical way of describing man's life of sin, he considered his poetry as a weapon for countering his affliction.³² For example, at the beginning of the Regement of Princes (c. 1412) Hoccleve described the morbid anxiety that drove him to wander aimlessly outside the city until he was urged to write down his troubles so that he might be diverted from his melancholy.³³ After this and several other attempts at relief have failed, he set about translating some worthwhile work for Henry of Lancaster, and through this therapy he cured both his poverty and desperation, like Burton two centuries later.

Hoccleve took another piece of advice, to talk aloud about his problems, when he undertook to write his Complaint (c. 1421). He felt so weighed down with languor and sorrow that he could hardly go on living, until he decided to open his heart and divulge his emotional troubles (ll. 22-35).³⁴ Hoccleve next wrote the Dialogus cum Amico in which he announced his intent to translate the Latin treatise Lerne to Dye. His Friend, however, worried that these mental labors might precipitate the same problems he had suffered in the past and serve rather as a strain than a remedy:

Of studie was engendred thy seeknesse,
 And þat was hard / woldest thou now agayn
 Entre into þat laborious bisynesse,
 Syn it thy mynde and eek thy wit had slayn?
 Thy conceit is nat worth a payndemayn:
 Let be / let be / bisye thee so no more,
 Lest thee repente / and reewe it ouersore.

(379-85)

The Friend's fears were based on a common belief that the hard concentration required to write poetry could cause rather than cure a mental disorder such as melancholy, a psychological affliction which, as illustrated in the works of Guillaume d'Auvergne, was often indistinguishable from acedia.

Offering an observation that would have been confirmed by Cassian, Boccaccio remarked that too much studious repose is "the mother of dullness and the enemy of creativity." In a minatory dream of the sort common in the acedia tradition, the phantom of Petrarch appeared to the lethargic Boccaccio and delivered this advice:

. . . too much severity sometimes breaks the lazy person rather than refreshes him, and I think that it is best by far to use mildness, so that I may inspire shame for your slothfulness rather than ill will in your spirit.³⁵

The long, taxing labor involved in writing and constantly revising Piers Plowman may have benefited Langland as a means for exploring his slothful temperament, by combining self-analysis and confession with the act of penance, but we cannot know what, if any, safeguards he might have taken -- whether alternating his writing with some other occupation as Cassian would have prescribed, or cutting short his work whenever the burden became too great. Considering the grave concerns of Hoccleve's Friend, added to the fact that Langland's on-going dissatisfaction with his poem makes it unlikely that the task was an easy one, we should allow for the possibility that the work itself may have posed dangers nearly equal to its benefits.

Realizing that a slothful temperament was an infirmity readily provoked by hard discipline, men like Roger Bacon concluded that people who suffered from acedia were often better helped by finding outlets for relaxation.³⁶ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Will's only explicit excuse for his "making" relies totally on Cato's advice to relieve care with some enjoyment; many holy men "pleyden þe parfiter to ben" (B. xii. 20-24). The holy men Will has in mind were probably the desert fathers who used relaxation to thwart ariditas spiritualis, or simply monks for whom Benedict allowed a varied discipline and even moderate laughter.³⁷ The author of An Alphabet of Tales, quoting the same line as Langland from Cato's Disticha, tells a story in which the great desert father Anthony defended recreation as a necessary means for protecting the unity of a religious order. To make

his point, the saint had ordered an archer to keep pulling back on his bow until he refused for fear of breaking it:

Than Saynt Anton sayd vnto hym agayn, "loo! son, þus it is in þe werke of allmyghtie God; ffor and we draw it oute of mesur, we may sone breke itt; þat is to say, and we halde our brethir so straye in aw þatt þai com to no myrth nor no sporte, we may lightlie cauce þaim to breke þer ordur. And herefor vs muste som tyme lowse our pithe, & suffre þaim hafe som recreacion & disporte emang all þer other chargis, as Caton says, Interpone tuis interdum guadia curis."38

Robert Henryson uses this same image in the Prologue to the Fables:

Forther mair, ane Bow that is ay bent
 Worthis unsmart, and dullis on the string;
 Sa dois the mynd that is ay diligent,
 In ernistful thochtis, and in studyng.³⁹

He thus confirms Will's assertion that writing poetry, whatever its moral service, might afford the poet with healthy relaxation. As Johann Huizinga has observed, "all poetry is born of play."⁴⁰

Despite the general medieval acceptance of poetry's recreative function, Langland stands as an unremitting advocate of work and, in his own voice, makes hardly any allowance for relaxation. In the

opening vision of the Fair Field, he praises the laborers who "putten hem to plou₃, pleiden ful selde, / In settynge and sowynge swonken ful harde" (B. prol. 20-21). Even his kind of poetry bears witness to the minimizing of what we might call "play-elements" -- rhyme, fixed meter, stanzaic composition, decorative imagery.⁴¹ Not tempted by the elaborate stanzas that caught the fancy of the author of Pearl and Sir Gawain, Langland chose instead to write in a plain but serviceable meter which the great artificer Chaucer dismissed as "rum, ram, ruf." Even if we consider personification and allegory as manifestations of the mind at play, Langland's dissatisfaction with images and his tendency to discard the allegorical in favor of the literal betray an underlying disdain for the game-elements inherent in the poetic tradition in which he worked. In his hands, language becomes a working and workman-like instrument that moves against the normal intent of poetry to cultivate the artificial and the playful.

Langland's neglect of game-elements, I believe, has much to do with his conception of his role as a true vates or religious poet. Examining the history of literature in various cultures, Huizinga has noted that the play-elements in poetry increase in direct proportion as belief in a sacred myth diminishes.⁴² The inverse corollary is not invariably true -- speeches in the devout Corpus Christi plays were often composed in highly elaborate stanzas consonant with their pervasive game-spirit -- but it seems to apply well enough to Langland, who believed so totally in the divine story of Christ that he saw no need permanently to obscure it with ornaments. The play-elements that

are included -- the discarded images, the shape-shifting personifications, the disintegrating allegories -- simply bear witness to the difficulty and frustration of understanding, really understanding, the ultimate Truth whose existence is never questioned. Thoreau once wrote that "unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind."⁴³ Had he made allowance for men as sensitive and resourceful as himself, he might have realized that in literary endeavors the writer might discover a game that could be used, consciously and skillfully, as a firm bulwark against despair.

Escaping idleness, analyzing the pathology of his dominant vice, and granting relaxation to body and spirit: not one of these can be discounted as part of Langland's motive for writing so doggedly at his poem. Nor, taken all together, do they provide a complete account to satisfy our sense of his obsessiveness. That sense is sharpened not so much by familiarity with a single text but rather by a view of his entire career, in sequence and as process. G.H. Russell, an expert by way of his work as the editor of the new C-text, believes that Langland applied himself hard to his business, often striving against a feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration evident in all three versions. The A-text "seems to have ended in dissatisfaction, even in something approaching despair,"⁴⁴ and despite the mammoth effort invested in the B-continuation, there are signs everywhere that work proceeded fitfully, with impatience over limitations of genre, with the begrudging resignation of "that was a way of putting it -- not

very satisfactory," and with the beleaguered hope that what came later would redeem what had already passed. There would be time for visions and revisions.

Besides an attempt to correct and polish, the C-text was another huge task requiring a great deal of time and a great deal of labor. Again the work seems to have been spurred on by relentless dissatisfaction, but without clear motives.⁴⁵ Since Langland busied himself not only with major additions and deletions but also with the alteration of hundreds of small details, not always with happy results, the final version of the poem has gained a "well-deserved reputation for fussiness."⁴⁶ So many passages were arbitrarily and pointlessly changed that one is tempted, as J.M. Manly once remarked, "to think they were rewritten for the mere sake of rewriting."⁴⁷

My own final impression is not so absurdist. Langland had a great deal to say to his audience, and part of his goal was to mirror the whole history of a spiritual life -- his own -- in a dream-poem transformed from an objective to a reflexive medium. Having determined its structural outlines in the B-text, "he could proceed only by going back, rewriting his poem from the beginning, incorporating in it his subsequent experience, and making its next topic precisely the difficulties he had in continuing it at all."⁴⁸ And yet however praiseworthy his intention, Langland betrays none of Boccaccio's desire for reputation either in his own time or among subsequent generations of readers.⁴⁹ Fame was not the spur. There is no sense of artistic immortality such as one finds in The House of Fame -- though rejected

by Geoffrey the dreamer (ll. 1873-82) -- or the awareness that vernacular literature survives to be enjoyed by future audience, as Chaucer notes in Book II of Troilus (ll. 22-28). Langland does not even speak of his work as a poem that can be finished and released as a self-contained entity, but it is rather as if "making" itself were a never-ending process, "a continuous action rather than a finite production, which as a mode of life must be justified before God and man."⁵⁰

This concept of poetry as process rather than product, evidenced by an almost unending series of revisions in the C-text, accords beautifully with one of the central tenets of the poem -- that a man's intentions count much more than the outward results of those intentions -- so that together they provide the most comprehensive explanation for Langland's "making." To write poetry took an assertion of the poet's will, and to persevere meant that his will continued to work in the service of God, whatever men might think of the poem's contents or artistic merits.

Duns Scotus offered this much-quoted illustration of voluntary commitment: "By one act of the will I can determine myself to write, and by another act I can decide not to write, but I cannot be simultaneously in act in regard to both things together."⁵¹ Because Langland made his decision to write, any decision not to write would have represented a willful trespass. As a mental activity involving willing and thinking, the poetic process would have been regarded by Scotistic thinkers as an act cut off from the outside world -- like the

act of dreaming itself -- and therefore more nearly perfect, perhaps, because it was not subject to earthly transience. Such voluntary activities ceased not because they had reached their own end but only because man is a mortal creature who cannot sustain any action indefinitely. Since the last two passus of the C-version are virtually identical to the corresponding sections of the B-text, Russell believes that the process of revision was cut short by the poet's death.⁵² If that is true, we might conclude that Langland sustained his efforts as long as he was humanly able.

Considering the poet's willing commitment to work per se, without total concern for the visible fruits of this labor, we can detect an elusive brotherhood between Langland and Piers, the humble plowman, based not on the outward dignity of labor according to social status, but on their shared devotion to doing. The nexus is strengthened because plowing had been invoked since the Classical age as a metaphor for writing. Cicero wrote to his friend Atticus, "Hoc litterularum exaravi -- I plowed out this little letter," and Isidore transmitted the metaphor to the Middle Ages in his Etymologiae (VI, 9, 2 and 14, 71).⁵³ The equation of writing with plowing is made by Jean de Meun in Le Roman de la Rose (ll. 21,181-82) and by Chaucer in The Knight's Tale: "I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere, / And wayke been the oxen in my plough" (CT, I, 886-87). Perhaps the most remarkable example for our purposes is found in Ackermann aus Böhmen, whose third part begins with the riddling line, "Ich bins genannt ein ackerman, von vogelwat is mein pflug," the second half of which means

"the quill is my plow."⁵⁴ This scribal adage was too well known to have been far from Langland's mind. While the poetic process was basically mental, a poem the size of Piers Plowman would have demanded a great many hours at the quill-plow.⁵⁵

Writing thus becomes another way of plowing in the Half Acre, in a more profound sense than understood perhaps by Chaucer and most members of scriptoria. In the mystical meaning explored in Passus XIX, the plowman is an image of the preacher and the conveyer of God's message -- work that conforms to Thought's definition of Dobet (B. viii. 78-95) -- although Langland never wholly forgets the original image of Piers as a humble laborer pursuing the most basic form of Dowel which leads simply but surely to Heaven. "Jesus said to him: No man putting his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9.62): this metaphor, too, must have weighed upon Langland's artistic life. Like Piers' plowing, the poet's "making" became a form of pilgrimage and an act of penance, but without ever losing its fundamental meaning as an assertion of the will in the service of God.

Langland's unspoken attitude toward his writing can perhaps be illustrated by the scene from Lydgate's Pilgrimage of the Life of Man in which the Pilgrim encounters the figure Labor, who is engaged in the task of weaving and unweaving nets. At first the Pilgrim is puzzled:

"Yt wer merveyyl thow sholdest the

So symple a crafft on the to take,

To make nattys & vnmake;
 The wyche crafft (whan al ys souht)
 Ys so pore, yt wynneth nouht."

(ll. 11,340-44)

Like the poet who offers nothing essential to the maintenance of society, Labor explains that he continues to "make & vnmake" in order to avoid idleness and erase the rust of vice with continual diligence: "Swych as I kan, swych I acheue."⁵⁶ Lydgate must have understood that Labor's making and unmaking were analogous to the poet's work of writing and revising, and at the same time reminiscent of the Christian tradition's greatest champion of work for its own sake. Lydgate's Labor and the poet Langland can both be compared to Paul the Hermit, who from one point of view is an archetypally absurd character spending his solitary life in the wastes of Egypt weaving baskets, burning them at the end of each year, and then beginning all over again to weave another mountain of wattle.⁵⁷ Yet these figures differ from an absurd hero like the Sisyphus of Camus in two crucial ways: their drudgery was voluntary in the fullest sense of the word, and the ordeal had a conclusion far beyond itself -- to reach a Heaven whose glories were so transcendent as to equalize the worldly trades of poet and plowman, basket-weaver and king.

We must take care, then, not to number Langland among the mass of men who endure "lives of quiet desperation." He was forever vocal concerning the corruption that he found in society and the possibility

that his own poem could do little to stem the decline, and might even contribute to the atmosphere of doubt and confusion. Yet it would be equally wrong to envisage him as a sort of fourteenth-century William Cowper toiling obsessively at The Task while haunted by the belief that whatever he did, he was damned below Judas. Langland tried hard to dissociate himself from the "Iaperes and Iangeleres, Iudas children," but what really set him apart were probably his trust in God's mercy and his hope of eternal reward.

It is sometimes possible to glimpse the Kierkegaardian catch-image in his apparent willingness to take a step forward and to prize that step above the fear of uncertainty, so that not to step forward signified the crime of inaction and despair, even if a man strayed into error and stumbled, even if he discovered his step needed to be withdrawn. But for Langland these were uncertainties of means only, not of ends. Truth remained eternally aloft in the Tower. It was only a matter of finding one's way out of the labyrinth of the Fair Field where so many deceitful voices were bent on making a man take a step backwards. While the roads were many, and some preferred above others, those that led uphill eventually brought the pilgrim home to the Tower. It was Good Faith who first encouraged Will to speak out against the corruption of the friars, and in the end it was probably lewtee that sustained Langland in his endeavors: faith in a loving and merciful God, and confidence that "making" with words was the one form of Dowel that he did best.

The leading British philosophers of the early fourteenth

century had speculated that human perception, including the poet's visions, might be nothing other than unprovable and untrustworthy opinion, no matter how carefully the writer tried to set down his experiences.⁵⁸ The link between the mind and reality was forged by words whose meanings were instituted by the voluntary assent of the speaker and his listeners alike, so that the individual mind with its shifting imagistic-linguistic processes became a place for boundless exploration, but also a place for inevitably getting lost.⁵⁹ The poet's last refuge was not aesthetics or intellectual theology; it was simple fideism. There remained only one absolute -- the will of a loving God -- but that was enough.

Since Langland's poem ends just short of Will's death and the Day of Judgment, we must go to Revelations 20.12 for the final unwritten scene in his spiritual life:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing in the presence of the throne. And the books were opened; and another book was opened, which was the book of life. And the dead were judged by those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

The author of Revelations probably conceived of these books as records kept in Heaven as part of the mystery of the Doom, but there was a belief in the Middle Ages that each man brought with him his own account book or register of his good and bad works.⁶⁰ "At þe dredful

dome, [the] dede shulle rise / And comen alle before Crist, acountes to yelde" (B. vii. 193-94).

For Langland, then, the book of his life would not have been only a vast manuscript bearing the title Visio Willi de Petro Plouhman, but the book as symbolic evidence of a life spent laboring faithfully, with aches and strains and sweat of the brow, in the Lord's vineyard. Even Boccaccio acknowledged that fame was only a secondary reward: "if all trace of a person is lost among mankind, his memory is not lost to God for whose glory he worked."⁶¹ It probably would not have mattered greatly to Langland that mankind has lost virtually all memory of his mundane existence, because he would have been comforted by the fundamental assurance that every labor willingly undertaken and loyally endured would be rewarded in the end -- an assurance given powerful voice here by Thomas à Kempis, speaking in the person of God:⁶²

One houre shal come whan all labour shal cesse & all noyse. Litel it is & short, all þat passip wiþ tyme. Do þat þou dost; labore treuly in myn vyneȝerde; I shal be þy rewarde. Write, rede, synge, morne, kepe silence, pray, suffre manly contrariousnes. For euerlastyng lif is worþe all þese & moche more & muche gretter bateiles.

ENDNOTES

1. Curtius, European Literature, pp. 310-11, catalogues "the religious metaphors of the book" as offered by the Bible itself. Langland's attitudes toward language will come as no surprise to readers of more recent criticism, especially the first and final chapters of Northrop Frye's The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 3-30 and 199-233.
2. J.A. Burrow, "Words, Works and Will," in Critical Approaches, ed. Hussey, pp. 111-24.
3. B. vii. 87; vii. 74; xii. 235-36.
4. B. xviii. 255-60 (Skeat, I, B. xviii. 252-57) has been discussed by R.E. Kaske, "The Speech of 'Book' in Piers Plowman," Anglia, 77 (1959), 117-44, and Richard L. Hoffman, "The Burning of 'Boke' in Piers Plowman," MLQ, 25 (1964), 57-65. They both agree generally that Book (the Bible) means he should be burned if he does not fulfill his duty as an accurate witness to sacred events.
5. Spearing, Dream-Poetry, p. 74.
6. Bloomfield, Apocalypse, p. 37.
7. Donaldson, The C-Text and Its Poet, pp. 142-43, comments on the movement from Sloth to the branches leading to it, which include "wordes of murthe," and then to the poet's attempt to clarify his idea of minstrels, but Donaldson does not discover any coherence in this transition of topics.

8. The A-text makes clear the lesson should be poetic:

For þus wytnessip his woord, werche þou þeraftir,
 þat loue is þe leuest þing þat oure Lord askip.
 And ek þe plante of pes; preche it in þin harpe
 þer þou art mery at mete, 3if men bidde þe 3edde.
 [For bi kuyngne knowynge in herte comseth ther a fitte.]

(A. i. 135-38)

This last line, printed by Skeat, has been dropped by Kane as a scribal elaboration.

9. The Distichs of Cato: A Famous Medieval Textbook, ed. and trans. Wayland Johnson Chase (Madison: University of Wisconsin Studies in the Social Sciences and History, no. 7, 1922), p. 30 (III, 6). Significantly, these lines follow immediately another proverb in which the Latin poet warned against the dangers of sloth: "Segnitium fugito, quae uitae ignauia fertur; / Nam cum animus languet, consumit inertia corpus."

10. Nevill Coghill, "God's Wenches and the Light That Spoke: Some Notes on Langland's Kind of Poetry," English and Medieval Studies Presented to J.R.R. Tolkien, ed. Norman Davis and C.L. Wrenn (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 200.

11. Burrow, "Words, Works and Will," p. 118.

12. Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," Speculum, 53 (1978), p. 104.

13. Donaldson, The C-Text and Its Poet, pp. 147-48, discusses the profusion of minstrel imagery in the poem and, pp. 136-55, offers a

splendid treatment of Langland's attitudes toward minstrelsy.

14. Burrow, Richardian Poetry, pp. 12-14. Dieter Mehl, Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 7 and generally pp. 7-13, had diminished the literary contributions of the minstrels. A variety of evidence can be produced to indicate that "minstrels were normally the professional purveyors of romances" and other forms of popular literature; see Albert C. Baugh, "The Middle English Romance: Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation," Speculum, 42 (1967), 1-31, especially 2-12. See, for example, The Romance of Emaré, re-ed. Edith Rickert, 1906, EETS e.s. 99, p. xxviii; Firumbras and Otuel and Roland, ed. Mary I. O'Sullivan, 1935, EETS o.s. 198, p. xxv; and Mandeville's Travels, ed. M.C. Seymour (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 158. Baugh, pp. 29-30, concludes that minstrels not only inserted occasional couplets and brief passages, but were accustomed to altering, reshaping, and transforming a poem into a new utterance. A recent critic to endorse this view is Robert M. Longworth. "Sir Orfeo, the Minstrel, and the Minstrel's Art," SP, 79 (1982), 1-11.

15. Curtius, pp. 471-72 ("The Mode of Existence of the Medieval Poet") notes that self-respecting authors had a standing complaint against the buffoons who were rewarded so handsomely for their low entertainments.

16. The B-poet cut out two passages from the A-text (i. 135-38 and viii. 43-45) that had made Will appear to be a minstrel.

17. Donaldson, pp. 140-42 and 150-51; Bloomfield, Apocalypse, pp. 151-52; and Spearing, Dream-Poetry, p. 157.
18. Chambers, Man's Unconquerable Mind, p. 151.
19. Donaldson, p. 141.
20. Bloomfield, Apocalypse, p. 152.
21. Donaldson, p. 136.
22. Ibid., pp. 141-42.
23. Curtius, pp. 474-75 ("The Poet's Divine Frenzy"), explains how the notion of poetic madness came down to the Middle Ages from the Roman authors and ultimately from Plato.
24. Ibid., pp. 88-89 and 468-69.
25. Gower ends the Confessio Amantis (Macaulay, ed., vol. II, p. 479) with a Latin commendation to Henry of Lancaster in which he offers this account of his literary corpus: "inter labores et ocia ad aliorum noticiam tres libros doctrine causa forma subsequenti propterea composuit."
26. Kuhn's interpretation as a whole can be found in The Demon of Noontide, p. 58. The Italian poet is probably recalling Horace's Satire II, iii, 14-15. "Vitanda est improba Siren Desidia," in Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica, trans. Fairclough, pp. 152-53.
27. In a famous passage from The Fates of Illustrious Men, trans. Louis Brewer Hall (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1965), pp. 104-07, Boccaccio defends leisure as the necessary condition for a poet who fills his idleness with great diligence. At the same time, he warns against fraudulent men who affect the leisure of a poet in order to

enjoy idleness for its own sake. Outside appearances are seldom reliable, as Langland was so acutely aware.

28. Hesiod's Theogony (97-103) is included in The Homeric Hymns and Homerica, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1914), pp. 84-85.

29. De Institutis Coenobiorum, ed. Petchenig, X, 7-25. and Conlationes XXIV, ed. Petschenig, V, 23 and XXIV, 5.

30. Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy, pp. 20-21.

31. Doob, pp. 30 and 208-31.

32. Doob, pp. 210-11 and 229, leaves open the question of autobiographical authenticity. Jerome Mitchell argues that Hoccleve presents an accurate account of his own life and character, in Thomas Hoccleve: A Study in Early Fifteenth-Century English Poetic (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968), pp. 1-19. On the other hand, Eva M. Thornley has judged Hoccleve's Male Regle (c. 1406) more conventional than autobiographical on the basis of the number of features it shares with penitential lyrics of the period; "The Middle English Penitential Lyric and Hoccleve's Autobiographical Poetry," NM, 68 (1967), 295-321.

33. Doob, p. 217, referring to Hoccleve's Works: The Regement of Princes, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, 1897, EETS e.s. 72, p. 28 (ll. 750-56). She notes, on the same page, that Chaucer uses a similar method to exorcise the Black Knight's grief in The Book of the Duchess (ll. 548-51).

34. Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems, ed. Furnivall and

Gollancz, p. 96. This volume also includes the text of Dialogus cum Amico.

35. Boccaccio, The Fates of Illustrious Men, trans. Hall, pp. 202 and 206.

36. Wenzel, The Sin of Sloth, pp. 59-60.

37. Benedict, Regula, vii (Doyle, trans., pp. 27-28).

38. An Alphabet of Tales, ed. Banks, pp. 5-6. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, pp. 127-29, quotes this passage as an illustration that "the Middle Ages frequently used images of breaking or bursting to express this need for relaxation into laughter."

39. Henryson, The Poems and Fables, ed. Wood, p. 3 (ll. 22-25).

40. Huizinga, Homo Ludens, p. 129.

41. Ibid., p. 132.

42. Ibid., p. 130.

43. Henry David Thoreau, Walden, or Life in the Woods (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 18.

44. G.H. Russell, "Some Aspects of the Process of Revision in Piers Plowman," in Critical Approaches, ed. Hussey, p. 30.

45. Several distinguished critics have felt that the word "dissatisfaction" best describes Langland's attitude toward his poem; see for example Bloomfield, Apocalypse, p. 37; Burrow, "Words, Works and Will," p. 120. Russell, pp. 38-39, suggests some motives for the C-revision, but also shows that many prior explanations are unsatisfactory.

46. Ibid., p. 44.

47. J.M. Manly, "Piers the Plowman and Its Sequence," in The Cambridge History of English Literature, ed. Sir A.W. Ward and A.R. Waller, 15 vols. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1907-33), vol. II (1908), p. 30.
48. Spearing, Dream-Poetry, p. 151.
49. Boccaccio, The Fates of Illustrious Men (Bk. VIII), pp. 204-05, urges poets to subdue sloth with a fervent desire for renown. Curtius, pp. 476-79, offers a valuable discussion of "Poetry as Perpetuation." The opposing Christian view is outlined by B.G. Koonce's Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in "The House of Fame" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 13-45.
50. Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry," p. 103.
51. Arendt, Willing, p. 102.
52. Russell, "The Process of Revision," p. 47.
53. Curtius, p. 313, and D. Wilfred Abse, Speech and Reason: Language Disorder in Mental Disease (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971), p. 84.
54. Curtius, p. 314, credits the right interpretation to Arthur Hübner.
55. Curtius, pp. 468-69, reviews the tradition in which the writing of poetry was regarded as hard, sweat-producing labor, so that it was believed that "he upon whom lies such a task has renounced sloth."
56. Lydgate, Pilgrimage of the Life of Man, ed. Furnivall and Locock, pp. 310-13.

57. The saint's labor was imitated by others such as St.

Arsenius, and thus became a standard mode of religious occupatio, one shunned by Chaucer's Pardoner:

I wol nat do no labour with myne handes,

Ne make baskettes and lyue therby,

By cause I wol nat beggen ydelly.

(CT, VI, 444-46)

The popularity of the story can probably be attributed to Jerome's Vita S. Pauli Primi Eremitae (PL 23:17-28) and Cassian's inclusion of the saint's example in De Institutis (X, xxiv). Langland himself praises this hermit's work: "Poul after his prechyng paniers [baskets] he made" (B. xv. 290). See again Hemingway, "The Two St. Pauls," 57-58.

58. Gardner, Life and Times of Chaucer, p. 292.

59. Russell A. Peck, "Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions," Speculum, 53 (1978), 747 et passim, has more to say about the ways in which a fourteenth-century poet responded to new, startling speculation about the nature of language.

60. In Everyman, for instance, the account book is a literal stage prop which the protagonist is trying urgently to prepare for presentation; see V.A. Kolve, "Everyman and the Parable of the Talents," The Medieval Drama, ed. Sandro Sticca (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), p. 70. Behind the passage in Revelations probably stands the image of the book in Malachi 3.16-18. Thomas of Celano's hymn Dies Irae gave terrible prominence to the role of this book at the Last Judgment:

Liber scriptus proferetur

In quo totum continetur

Unde mundus iudicetur.

61. Boccaccio, The Fates of Illustrious Men, p. 205.

62. Thomas à Kempis, The Earliest English Translation . . . of the "De Imitatione Christi" (III, 52), p. 124.